



USU SPECIAL COLLECTIONS AND ARCHIVES

“Leftward March”: Student Liberalism at the Utah State Agricultural College

BY ROBERT PARSON

The Great Depression and the years leading up to World War II forever changed American society. The debilitating effects of the Depression “produced a profound shaking-up of American Society,” wrote Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.¹ Economic instability, an evolving national politic, and the growing threat of another world war, all combined to catapult the United States from what it was into what it became. No one was entirely immune. The transformation affected all regions of the country politically and all segments of the population. Utah voters long wedded to conservative ideals, even repudiated the extended Republican incumbencies of Senator Reed Smoot and Congressman Don B. Colton, and joined in the 1932 national Democratic landslide.²

The 1932 elections brought Franklin D.

This photograph of the staff of the Student Life appeared in the USAC 1936 Buzzer. Editor-in-chief Grant Redford is seated at the desk. Editorial staff member Edward Barrett is seated by the window.

Robert Parson is the university archivist for Utah State University. He would like to acknowledge the advice and commentary of John Walters, Documents Librarian at Utah State University.

¹ Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Age of Roosevelt: The Politics of Upheaval*, (Cambridge: The Riverside Press, 1960), 96.

² Wayne Stout, *History of Utah*, 4 vols. (Salt Lake City: The author, 1971), 3:84-87.

Roosevelt to the presidency, and his New Deal to national prominence. But even as New Dealers experimented to try and halt the downward economic spiral, the Depression deepened. Gradually, the emergence of more radical alternatives to Roosevelt's New Deal gained legitimacy. By appealing to constituencies long ignored by the "older ruling classes," politicians on both the left and the right of the political spectrum succeeded in further radicalizing the mainstream of American politics.³

This radicalism eventually spilled over onto this nation's university and college campuses, although most college students had been disassociated from the economic catastrophe. "The dominant student attitude toward the economy," stated Robert Cohen, "had an elitist cast.... Undergraduates tended to assume that they were the future leaders of society..." and therefore assured of a prosperous future. In fact, straw polls taken among college students nationally prior to the 1932 elections, revealed a surprisingly high percentage of them still preferring the traditional anti-statism of Herbert Hoover to the reform policies of FDR.⁴

The mood of undergraduate college students changed abruptly in the few months between FDR's election and his ascension to the presidency. The Depression spread rapidly and soon penetrated the flimsy bulwark of class distinction previously discernable on campuses. *The New York Times* reported: "the chief effect of the Depression had been to modulate the carefree joy of campus life..."⁵

The change from "flashy roadsters" and "snappy dressers," which had characterized college campuses during the 1920s, was punctuated at the Utah State Agricultural College (USAC) in Logan in the fall of 1932, when Gordon Van Buren, a senior from Ogden, rolled his father's sheep camp wagon onto campus and parked it in back of the new library. "We hail Gordon's solution [to] the depression," applauded the campus newspaper *Student Life*. "All this goes to show that if a man is clever enough he can have...an education..."⁶ During the next three years another twenty-seven students emulated Van Buren's extraordinary display of resolve by moving portable trailers onto this site, christening it "Windbreak," in recognition of the stiff canyon winds which blew across campus each morning. Having outgrown this location by 1935, the students relocated their burgeoning community to vacant property acquired along Seventh East Street between Eighth and Ninth North. By fall 1936, forty-five students had un-hitched their houses in "Trailertown." In December, Mrs. Blain Rowan

³ Such diverse groups as Scandinavian farmers in Minnesota, represented by Governor Floyd Olson; Jews and Italians in New York City, represented by Mayor Fiorello La Guardia; and the poor and dispossessed in Louisiana, represented by Senator Huey Long. See, Schlesinger, Jr., *The Age of Roosevelt: The Politics of Upheaval*, 97.

⁴ Robert Cohen, *When the Old Left Was Young: Student Radicals and America's First Mass Student Movement, 1929-1941* (New York: Oxford Press, 1993), 11.

⁵ Quoted in *Ibid.*, 17.

⁶ *Student Life*, (Logan) October 6, 1932.

of Ririe, Idaho, gave birth to a daughter, the community's official "first citizen."⁷

The 1930s brought other profound changes to the USAC campus. What began in 1890 in the unfinished south wing of Old Main had by 1938 grown to include most of the buildings presently adorning the Quad at the center of campus. In addition to the new library, which the college erected in 1930 at the Quad's south end, federal New Deal funds made possible the construction of the gothic-styled Commons/Home Economics Building (1935) on the Quad's southeast corner, and Lund Hall (1938), a women's dormitory located southeast of the library.

Transforming the college even more dramatically than New Deal projects was the growing student body, which more than doubled to 3,843 students between 1929 and 1938. Not only did the student body increase, according to *Student Life*, but, similar to its transformation on other college campuses, also manifested "a more sober understanding of the opportunities and the responsibilities which a college education offers."⁸

This resulted in the decade of the 1930s emerging as one of USAC's most successful periods. Part of this success must be attributed to a dedicated faculty. "This corps of loyal and devoted instructors," wrote Professor Joel E. Ricks in 1938, "sought... to give the students the mental stimulus and moral example that...would encourage them to face life unafraid."⁹ All members of the faculty took voluntary pay cuts and accepted additional teaching loads to accommodate increased enrollments. Additionally, every full-time employee of the college pledged 3 percent of his salary towards a student employment fund. "This noble gesture," wrote the editors of *Student Life*, is "one of the finest movements undertaken by a group of instructors...[and] is paving the way for many an Aggie student to complete his education...."¹⁰

Under the tutelage of a devoted faculty, student academic performance flourished. In 1936, G. Fred Somers became the first of three successive Rhodes Scholars selected from USAC. In 1937, George Piranian, who had emigrated from Switzerland while still in high school, joined Somers in England at Oxford University. William McEwan became the third consecutive USAC student to be honored as a Rhodes scholar in 1938. This unprecedented string of recipients, two in botany and one in chemistry, firmly established the college's academic reputation in the agricultural sciences.

Even as the applied sciences formed the underpinning of the college,

⁷ Papers Relating to Studentville at Utah State Agricultural College, Record group 10.2, Box 7, folder 8, University History Collection, Special Collections and Archives, Merrill-Cazier Library, Utah State University, Logan, Utah.

⁸ *Student Life*, October 1, 1931.

⁹ Joel E. Ricks, *The Utah State Agricultural College: A History of Fifty Years, 1888-1938* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Publishing Co., 1938), 119.

¹⁰ *Student Life*, October 1, 1931.



REUBEN NEWOLDS COLLECTION, USU SPECIAL COLLECTIONS AND ARCHIVES

students organized the Scribbler's Club in 1926, and began publishing the magazine *Scribble* "to encourage and advance the art of writing and provide means of expression for literary talent...."¹¹ In the 1930s, a particularly gifted group of writers included Austin Fife, Veneta L. Nielsen, May Swenson, Ray B. West, Jr., and Grant H. Redford graced the pages of *Scribble*.

This photograph of the USAC campus in the 1930s was taken from Old Main looking east toward the library.

Born at Lincoln, Bonneville County, in southeastern Idaho, Austin Fife spent three years studying at USAC, after returning from an LDS mission to France. In 1932, he received a fellowship from Stanford University, where he completed his undergraduate and masters degrees. After earning additional degrees at Harvard, Fife returned to Stanford for his doctorate in 1939 and wed his sweetheart Alta Stevens of Bountiful, Utah, who had accompanied him from USAC to Palo Alto in 1932. Together, the two embarked on a half-century journey gathering and documenting the song, verse, and material culture of the Mormon West. The Fifes returned to Logan in 1960, where Austin headed the Language Department at Utah State University.¹²

¹¹ *Scribble*, vol. 1, no. 1 (Fall 1926), masthead. Beginning in 1926, *Scribble* was a quarterly publication, which persisted through 1960. Copies available at Special Collections and Archives, Merrill/Cazier Library, Utah State University.

¹² Register to the Papers of Austin E. and Alta S. Fife, 1, Special Collections and Archives, Merrill/Cazier Library, Utah State University.



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Veneta L. Nielsen grew up in Wellsville, south of Logan, and enrolled at USAC in 1934. She graduated six years later. During World War II she taught English and composition to military personnel in training at the college, and as a result of her performance the college awarded her tenure. For the next thirty-five years she worked tirelessly at the institution, as well as within the community, to promote literature, poetry, and the art of creative writing. She authored several collections of poems, which received critical acclaim from friends and contemporaries.¹³

Austin Fife and Alta Fife, center and right, examine an acetate disc recorder with folklorist Hector Lee in 1950.

May Swenson encouraged Nielsen to write and publish for the general public. In a letter to a mutual friend and writer, Grant Redford, May Swenson wrote:

Recently Veneta N. sent me a monograph of her poems...called UNDER SOUND, and published by the USU English Dept. She has a number of splendid thoroughly first rate poems in it, that are very individual, and I wish she would come out from under her tender skin and get them published for the general public. If you have the time, write her and ask for a copy...and then help me convince her that she should submit them to good magazines....¹⁴

¹³ *Herald Journal* (Logan), October 27, 1998.

¹⁴ Letter, May Swenson to Grant Redford, June 23, 1959, in the Papers of Grant H. Redford, (Mss) 245, Box 17, folder 7, Special Collections and Archives, Merrill/Cazier Library, Utah State University. Hereafter referred to as Redford, SCA.

May Swenson became the most famous of the 1930s student *literati* at USAC. Swenson's poem, *Discord*, which appeared in the fall 1932 issue of *Scribble*, exemplifies how her poetry drew inspiration from the natural world.

There
where the water walks
suavely thru the reeds
Where frail cloud-urchens ride low
their misty steeds
There
where a school of Birch
rear an earnest whiteness
And a Blackbird pattern whirring
leans into the brightness
There
on the happy grass
dark-etched he came
A shrill hurt like a scar was
There
for lo! He was lame

May moved to New York City shortly after 1934. She endured tough economic times by working as a "writer's helper," and by working as an interviewer for the Federal Writer's Project. May emerged as a dominant poetic voice following World War II. In the four decades of her writing career Swenson published eleven books and received nearly every major award for her poetry. While the natural world continued to distinguish Swenson's work from the time of her first submission to *Scribble*, she is also widely acclaimed for her "profound explorations of issues of gender and sexuality."¹⁵

As Swenson went on to achieve great fame, Ray B. West, Jr., as a college teacher exerted great influence. As with Swenson, whose father Daniel headed the Woodworking Department, West's father, Ray, Sr., was Dean of the School of Engineering. Ray, Jr., graduated from USAC in 1933 and later received his doctorate from the University of Iowa. He taught English at several institutions, including USAC, before returning to Iowa, then to San Francisco State University where he established its creative writing program. He authored many short stories and poems and, co-founded the literary magazine *Western Review* with his colleague and friend Grant H. Redford.¹⁶

¹⁵ Paul Crumbley and Patricia M. Gantt, *Body My House: May Swenson's Work and Life*, (Logan: Utah State University Press, 2006), 3.

¹⁶ Register to Ray B. West Papers, p. 1, Special Collections and Archives, Merrill/Cazier Library, Utah State University.

Born in Seattle, Washington, Grant Redford spent his formative years in Logan where he received his diploma from USAC in 1937. Even before receiving his diploma, Redford began his teaching career at the Branch Agricultural College (BAC) in Cedar City (now Southern Utah University) in 1936. He spent a year at the University of Iowa, where he received a Master of Arts degree in 1940. Redford returned to BAC where he was head of the Language Department for three years. In 1943 he joined the faculty at the University of Washington teaching literature and creative writing and where he spent the rest of his teaching and writing career. He also nurtured the minds of young artists who attended the Port Townsend Summer School of the Arts.¹⁷

This small group of USAC students formed life-long friendships. They embraced a philosophy that simultaneously celebrated and opposed their shared Mormon culture. All eventually became disaffected from their Mormon faith.

Nationally, as well as locally, the 1930s produced a social climate that encouraged diversity, and challenged the more traditional culture of previous decades. Many students became critical of American institutions during the 1930s. Some embraced the new political ideas that emerged from FDR's New Deal policies; others resisted the prevailing shift towards Roosevelt and the Democrats in 1932. Such was student Ted Maughan, who expressed disdain for both FDR and Herbert Hoover. "I have looked in vain for a candidate that squarely faces the problems of today," wrote Maughan in an open forum to *Student Life*. "Instead they straddle the real problems and throw up the usual political 'smoke screen' about what the other side has done or has not done... It is a truism," he intoned, "that the result of the election this month will be an emotional reaction rather than a reasoned choice. May the best liar win."¹⁸

Disappointment with the political establishment prompted some students to explore other, even more radical options. In his 1932 *Scribble* essay "Leftward March," student Lynn Kloefer championed the presidential candidate Socialist Norman Thomas. What is needed, wrote Kloefer, "is Socialist advocated ownership of utilities, railroads, factories—popular control of all our means of production."¹⁹ Kloefer's preference stemmed from the ineffectiveness of both national parties to deal with the Depression.

It isn't enough for the donkey to bray that Hoover got us into this mess, just as it isn't right for Republicans to accuse Cleveland and Van Buren for our former depressions. It's not one of them, it's a combination of both – their whole political system with its laissez-faire and rugged American individualism... We talk of progress, yet we carry on with unchanging ideas handed down from the primer of Columbus. We talk of an

¹⁷ Mary P. Johnson, "Professor Grant Redford," in *Grant Redford, Tyranny of Shadows* (Seattle: L and H Printing Co., 1967).

¹⁸ *Student Life*, November 3, 1932.

¹⁹ Lynn Kloefer, "Leftward March," *Scribble*, 8 (Fall 1932): 5.

advanced civilization, our modern science, our new inventions, yet we go to Rome for our politics.²⁰

Like Kloefer, USAC's student body came mostly from Mormon communities in the Intermountain West. This largely homogeneous group, however, found alternative politics no less intriguing than did their counterparts in other regions of the country. Some Mormon communities, in fact, found a rich tradition of socialism in their church. While the leaders of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints during the 1930s embraced the predominant conservatism of the 1920s, some members found the historic Mormon values of community ownership and cooperation perfectly compatible with socialism.

For some Mormons, the Great Depression served to restore the significance of Joseph Smith, Jr.'s, call for a United Order, a concept steeped in socialist ideology.²¹ Among those hoping to resurrect Smith's ambitious social and economic experiment was USAC faculty member and rural sociologist Joseph A. Geddes, who lectured widely on the perceived efficacy of a United Order in combating the economic depression of the 1920s and 1930s. The "United Order takes direct issue with present day capitalism..." he emphatically wrote in 1935.²² Geddes held the decidedly unorthodox opinion that capitalism with its emphasis on profit would produce only mediocrity within the Mormon community, while the economic equality assured under the United Order would attract the most able and superior minds. Superior minds, working cooperatively, he concluded, would produce superior communities.²³ Geddes envisioned such a cooperatively arranged community as "the boat in which the United Order rides to accomplish its objective dealing with 'love thy neighbor as thyself.'"²⁴

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ The United Order, or the Law of Consecration and Stewardship, derived from an idea revealed to Joseph Smith in 1832. Smith directed church members to consecrate their property and wealth to the church and in turn be provided a stewardship based upon the concept of equality, "every man according to his wants and needs...seeking the interest of his neighbor..." The church attempted to implement this grand utopian experiment twice during its early history, first in Kirtland, Ohio, and Jackson County, Missouri, and second in territorial Utah during the 1870s. Although this policy failed in both instances, the idea of a United Order never lost its luster among faithful Latter-day Saints. See, *Doctrine and Covenants*, Section 82, 15-24.

²² Joseph A. Geddes, *Senior Manual 1935-36, The Community High Road to Better Things* (Salt Lake City: General Board of the Mutual Improvement Association of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints), 32. A sociologist who studied the effects of economic depression and out-migration on rural, Utah communities, Geddes championed the concept of the cooperation, both on and off campus. His 1935-1936 Mutual Improvement Association manual, which he prepared for the LDS church, was later withdrawn and censored by church authorities, who objected to his open advocacy for re-implementing the United Order. Geddes maintained his affinity for this historical Mormon concept throughout his life, and was instrumental in founding the Utah Cooperative Association during the 1930s. See, Robert Parson, "Along the Community High Road: Joseph A. Geddes and the United Order in the Twentieth Century," unpublished manuscript in possession of author.

²³ Geddes, *Senior Manual*, 32.

²⁴ Papers of Newell K. Hart in Caine Manuscript Collection (Mss) 3, Box 4, folder 16, Department of Special Collections and Archives, Merrill/Cazier Library, Utah State University.

In 1931, Benjamin B. Stringham seeking to establish an economic system, through barter, trade and the issuance of script, similar to that which operated in territorial Utah, formed the Natural Development Association (NDA) in Salt Lake City. Stringham, a devout LDS church member of the Pioneer Stake, recruited a large, and an influential group of followers to the organization. Owen Woodruff, nephew of Church President Heber J. Grant, firmly supported Stringham's efforts to alleviate the economic hardships of the Depression, and even approached his uncle on behalf of the organization.²⁵ A year later, however, church leaders denounced Stringham's NDA as a "revolutionary" movement "socialistic in character," and admonished "members of the church...not [to] identify themselves with it. The organization sought to reestablish the United Order, (or) a system akin thereto," declared the church's First Presidency, "a matter which... would be given attention when the Lord directed His servants so to act."²⁶

The First Presidency's rebuke of the NDA failed to diminish interest in the United Order. Another group with similar motives that also organized in 1931 was the Peoples Practical Government Corporation (PPGC). Like the NDA, it favored a system of barter, trade and cooperation around Christianity's great organizing principle: loving your neighbor as yourself. Through such a system the PPGC promised to "establish and maintain an ample surplus of life's necessities."²⁷

The "golden rule" thus elevated as a political and economic principle, some Mormons grew friendly toward socialism. The socialist creed appealed to other Christian churches as well during the 1930s, particularly those emphasizing the same "golden rule" philosophy. Socialist presidential candidate Norman Thomas, championed in Lynn Kloepper's *Scribble* article, was himself an ordained Presbyterian minister. A handful of gifted USAC students welcomed these provocative alternative models of arranging society.

Prominent among them was Ray B. West, Jr., who wrote that he was particularly predisposed to revel in "the rise of social consciousness... not only Roosevelt and the new deal, but the sub-culture that depended from it like the spur on the horseman's heel..."²⁸ West early on sloughed off the conservative elements of his Mormon heritage. "I had been rebel enough in my own youth," he later confided, "rebellng first against my family, then against my religion, then against most of the politicians of the world..."²⁹

²⁵ Randal M. Rathjen, "Evolution and Development of the Mormon Welfare Farms" (Ph.D. Dissertation, Michigan State University, 1969), 16-17.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 17.

²⁷ Papers of Joseph A. Geddes, Manuscript Collection (Mss) 75, Box 2, folder 1, Special Collections and Archives, Merrill-Cazier Library, Utah State University. .

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Papers of Ray B. West, Jr., Manuscript Collection (Mss) 76, Box 1, folder 1, Special Collections and Archives, Merrill-Cazier Library, Utah State University. Hereafter referred to as West, SCA.

West exhibited his rebelliousness even while serving an LDS mission to France, where he discovered the writings of James Joyce. Although Joyce's *Ulysses* was banned in the United States until 1933, West returned home with a copy of this contraband in hand.³⁰ In the early 1930s, he entertained other members of the Scribbler's Club by reading aloud passages of the work at a meeting hosted at the home of Austin Fife.³¹

As editor of *Scribble* in 1932, West solicited articles on politics. "Not that I perceived the policy of the magazine as political," he later wrote, "but in that third year of the Depression I saw literary and political problems inextricably linked."³² West endeavored to balance the fall issue of *Scribble* with contributions covering the political spectrum. He convinced Lynn Kloepper to represent the socialist point of view. Regrettably, he later revealed, I "could discover no one to outline the aims of Communism, which was my own preference at the time."³³

In his unpublished autobiography, "My Share of the Twentieth Century," West described his early attachments to communism, while living in Colorado. "With some of the money [I] earned from...outside stage appearances, [I] subscribed to two small, inexpensive magazines. One was called *Contempo*...The other came from Missouri and was titled *The Anvil*. Along with the first issue of this magazine came a letter from its founder and editor, Jack Conroy, asking.... about the political situation in Colorado." Conroy, a writer and celebrated working-class hero of the 1930s, opined that the "only hope he could see for the country was to adopt a socialistic, perhaps even communistic, form of government." West sent Conroy a copy of his poem championing the Bonus Marchers, war veterans who had marched on Washington, D.C., in 1932. Conroy thought West could improve the piece by making it more sharply political, bringing greater attention to the plight of the marchers, while denouncing President Hoover's draconian military solution in harsher terms.

West bristled at the suggestion: "I did not...intend it as propaganda," he later wrote, "but as a comment on the times and how they affected the human spirit." At the same time, however, he confessed to feeling "that he, as a person, was not doing all he could to encourage, to assist...the efforts that others...were making to eliminate the suffering brought about by the Depression."³⁴

It was during this period of self-discovery that West sought the advice of a known socialist bookseller, asking him how he might bring to bear his writing skills on behalf of the working class. The bookseller simply handed him an address. "[It] was in the railroad yards, at the far end of a vacant warehouse," West recalled, "where there was a small office and a young girl

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ R.R. Knudson, *May Swenson: A Poets Life In Photos* (Logan: Utah State University Press, 1996), 32-33.

³² West, Box 64, folder 10, p. 330, SCA.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid., 224.



LITERARY ESTATE OF MAY SWENSON

May Swenson. This photograph is from the book *May Swenson: A Poet's Life in Photos* by R.R. Knudson and Suzanne Bigelow published by Utah State University Press in 1996.

sitting at a desk. It turned out to be not the headquarters of the Socialist Party, but of the communists." West asked "if there wasn't something he could do to aid the cause of reform, imagining they might be interested in utilizing [my] writing skills." After studying him closely for a moment, the young woman told him, "there was a group going out that night to paint slogans on factory walls, and that she imagined they would welcome his aid." Sloganeering on factory walls was not what West had in mind, and he later confessed that this episode disillusioned him.³⁵

Following this quixotic attempt to serve as an instrument for reform, West returned to Logan and the USAC campus where he devoted himself to academic pursuits. As editor of *Scribble*, he envisioned the possibility of a new literary magazine featuring "western" authors. "Recognizing the talent of my fellow students," he recalled, "I imagined the wealth of raw talent that must have existed on other,

similar campuses in the West."³⁶ West, with the help of Grant Redford, launched the *Intermountain Review* in 1937. A year later it became the *Rocky Mountain Review* and in 1940 the *Western Review*.

The same year that the *Intermountain Review* was launched West joined Redford on the faculty at the Branch Agricultural College (BAC). They moved the editorial offices of the *Review* to Cedar City, and together promoted the relatively new genre of western American literature. Some of the most significant western writers, including Vardis Fisher, Wallace Stegner, and May Swenson, found early voice in this publication.

Like West and Austin Fife, Grant Redford also served a mission for the LDS church during the late 1920s. And like West and Fife, Redford abandoned the church owing to its conservative social policies. Redford was recusant by nature. His 1933 piece entitled "Sinful Sex," which appeared in *Scribble*, took exception to prudish notions about human sexuality. "Why should the most important thing in Life," Redford asks at the beginning of his essay, "the very means of its perpetuation, be shrouded in subdued silences, discrete glances, and smutty stories? What is there so disgraceful about having a body?"³⁷ Redford's article was a rejoinder to student outrage over USAC Professor Frank Arnold's scholarly piece on pre-marital

³⁵ Ibid., 323-24

³⁶ Ibid., 330.

³⁷ Grant Redford, "Sinful Sex," *Scribble*, 8 (Spring 1933): 8.

sex. Interestingly, Arnold's piece urged students to abstain from pre-marital sex; yet the editors of *Student Life* still objected to any discussion of human sexuality.³⁸ "If sex is sinful, debased, unmentionable," concluded Redford, "then so also is life in its every phase..."³⁹ Redford's position often alienated him from his more traditional collegians.

In a previous issue of *Scribble*, he explored other provocative subjects in a short story about an itinerant ranch hand named William Henry. Henry's inquisitive mind alienated him from his co-workers. In the midst of small talk at the end of the day, Henry found himself isolated from his fellow ranch hands because of his probing and often heretical questions. "I wonder why God keeps the stars covered up with the sun during the day, and lets them waste their shining all that time," he asked? "Good Hell!" one of the others exclaimed as they all stood up and slowly wandered back to the bunkhouse, glancing back over their shoulders at William Henry.⁴⁰

On another occasion Redford wrote, William Henry asked the Mormon Bishop: "Why he thought the 'Mormons' were the chosen people. William Henry knew why the Church thought so—he had worked for Mormons before—but he wanted to know what the Bishop... thought about it. This habit of asking questions of people," Redford discerned, "made them feel uncomfortable..."⁴¹

Clearly, Redford and his coterie pursued a line of intellectual inquiry that led to areas where most USAC students feared to tread. Like William Henry, Redford's group acquiesced to nothing, and delighted in challenging the sacred cows of the day. They were particularly inclined to join in the growing national debate over militarism and war.

A majority of their peers were similarly averse to militarization. Public opinion surveys, during the 1930s, revealed that a high percentage of college students opposed war, "and showed a decided bent toward Pacifism." Most college students considered world peace an achievable goal, and a majority even favored the idea of the United States disarming.⁴² Wars, editorialized the student paper, "are caused by un-natural conditions as pathogenic in character as are organisms which cause tuberculosis or smallpox."⁴³ By 1935, a majority of Americans, both on and off campus, were convinced that the United States had entered World War I not to make-the-world-safe-for-democracy as President Woodrow Wilson had argued, but to "save the skins of American Bankers..."⁴⁴

USAC student Sherman P. Lloyd in his 1933 *Scribble* essay contended

³⁸ *Student Life*, March 23, 30, 1933. Professor of languages Frank Arnold published his article, entitled "Our Dangerous Sex Freedom," in the April 1933 issue of the journal *Physical Culture*.

³⁹ Redford, "Sinful Sex," 8.

⁴⁰ Grant Redford, "William Henry," *Scribble*, 7 (April 1932): 5-6.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁴² *Student Life*, January 31, 1935.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, April 18, 1935.

⁴⁴ Cohen, *When the Old Left Was Young*, 92.

that Americans must come to perceive themselves as “citizens of the world if peace is to be sustained.” He noted how the “ultimate outcome lies directly with the peoples of the world, and more especially with the youth.... Our Statesman, our old men are approaching certain chaos in their belated attempts at tranquility.”⁴⁵ Lloyd, who later served as a Utah congressman in the 1960s and 1970s, conceded the inevitability of war without U.S. participation in a faltering League of Nations. He eschewed the predominant isolationist viewpoint of most college students, particularly those who espoused the socialist view. Yet, he shared Redford’s concern that just as militarists had successfully convinced the U.S. to enter World War I through the use of propaganda, so too were they endeavoring to shape domestic policy during the 1930s. Americans, Lloyd contended, needed to be warned about the treacherous “advance of war propaganda...that hypocritical glory which converts young blood to adventure...the splendid ceremonial of war, the colors, drums and trumpets—the plumes, the medals and the shining emblems, the glitter and parade and the traditional music...” Only through education could reason “replace force as the ultimate, international arbiter,” he wrote, “and reason can only be truthfully attained when peace is glorified—as war now is.”⁴⁶

Redford used the pages of *Student Life* to denounce war propaganda. In his column “Fact and Fancy” he assailed propaganda as “insidious, malicious, lying, [and] life-rotting. Why,” he asked his readers, “must we be so blind as to let the vile economic and political militarists slip these patriotic-coated pills into our unsuspecting mouths?”⁴⁷

In a subsequent edition, Edward Barrett, freshman editor of *Student Life*, repudiated Redford’s anti-militarism with the parody “Racked and Rancid.” It is only with “a bigger and better-equipped army [with] more battleships and airplanes that the U.S.A. can maintain peace,” Barrett claimed. “Armaments are necessary to preserve peace, maintain security and deter aggression.” (It was Barrett’s position that came to dominate American foreign policy following World War II.) Although he was “certain that all will agree with this policy, especially second-year Private Redford whom we have recently noticed parading the halls and grounds in one of the military department’s beloved monkey suits,” few did in the 1930s.⁴⁸ Redford’s and all male students participation in military drill was compulsory.

Although radical student organizations such as the National Student League (NSL) contested the constitutionality of these mandatory programs, the Supreme Court upheld the right of land grant colleges and universities to compel military training in 1934.⁴⁹ Despite this legal reversal, the NSL

⁴⁵ Sherman P. Lloyd, “The Next War,” *Scribble*, 8 (Spring 1933): 6.

⁴⁶ *Student Life*, April 18, 1935, 4.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, February 20, 1935.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, April 10, 1935.

⁴⁹ Cohen, *When the Old Left Was Young*, 61. See specifically, *Hamilton v. Regents of the University of California*, 293 U.S. 245 (1934).

continued to campaign against militarism. In 1933, the organization adopted the Oxford Pledge from British students who vowed to never again "fight for its King and country." Between 1933 and 1936, thousands of college students signed the Americanized version.⁵⁰ Nationally, one-third of polled college students claimed to support this categorical refusal to fight, while an additional one third claimed they would fight only if the United States were invaded.

At 11:00 a.m. on April 12, 1934, more than 25,000 college students abandoned their classrooms to support a NSL sponsored anti-war demonstration. Timed to coincide with the seventeenth anniversary of America's entry into World War I, the event garnered considerable press coverage, particularly in New York City, the epicenter of student radicalism. From there, news of the event spread rapidly through the grapevine of student unrest, as the NSL anticipated and planned for an even larger and more inclusive protest the following spring.

At USAC Grant Redford urged readers of *Student Life* to join the national protest along with other "thinking people of the nation. The more united the people of this nation stand now," Redford exhorted, "the less scattered and mutilated they will be in the future."⁵¹ Rather than occurring in concert with the April 12 national walkout, students agreed to delay the "rally" for one week, which rendered the event at USAC more subdued than those held on campuses in the east and in California. Still, as students packed the Old Main chapel at 11:00 a.m. on April 16, Redford contended that the USAC student body was participating "in sentiment" with the national protest. The anti-war assembly featured comments by Redford and fellow student Hermoine Tracy, as well as faculty members Milton R. Merrill and W.L. Wanlass.

Merrill and Wanlass both witnessed the horrors of the earlier world war, and feared that an orchestrated campaign of propaganda was driving the U.S. toward another. "Those of us that lived through the world war and lived to see the aftermath of that war," stated Wanlass, "must be thoroughly convinced that it is not only futile as a method or a chance to settle the great problems, but the reverse of that; and in time it has the effect of creating new and more aggravating problems."⁵²



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**A Caricature of Grant Redford
from the 1936 Buzzer.**

⁵⁰ Ibid., 80.

⁵¹ *Student Life*, April 4, 1935.

⁵² Papers of E.G. Peterson, Record group 3.1/6-2, Box 101, folder 9, Special Collections and Archives, Merrill-Cazier Library, Utah State University. Hereafter referred to as Peterson, SCA.

Merrill expressed astonishment that the “assembly and others that were held generally throughout the country...should be considered in any sense radical.” He made the interesting point that “the conservatives” should be the ones most opposed to war, because war “is the most dangerous thing for those...who occupy the positions of authority...The people in power ordinarily are most likely to be injured severely in case of war...”⁵³

Hermoine Tracy provided a woman’s perspective of war. “Here is the first thing that must be done by our sex,” she began.

Women must realize their special responsibility for peace. Men have been taught that physical courage is man’s chief virtue. Every man hates to be called a coward, and when a man pleads that physical conflict is no longer an effective institution in our time, someone is sure to call him a coward. If we fail, it will be because we lack moral courage. Women no longer have the excuse that they are compelled to accept passively the acts of government. If women could and would realize their responsibility, really understand war in its agony, it is incredible that they would listen with complacency to statesman and generals who praise them for their vicarious heroism in sending their sons, not only to induce, but to inflict that agony.⁵⁴

Indeed, Redford found himself baited with the charge of cowardice, as Tracy predicted.

“Yesterday,” Redford opened his address by referring to, “a certain man on this campus called me and my kind...yellow, and told me that we were trying to destroy manhood in the youth of the nation today.” Well, he continued, “If to hate greed and hate injustice...and hate starvation...in a land of plenty is yellow,” Redford pointed to those assembled, then “so are you—[at least] every intelligent one of you,” he emphasized.⁵⁵

This was not the first time Redford had been verbally accosted. In March, his *Student Life* column addressed the topic of friendship and noted how a supposed friend had been casting aspersions about Redford’s political affiliations.⁵⁶ Redford attempted to answer these rumors during the assembly. “I have been asked a number of questions,” he remarked. “First, for the benefit of a few, I am not subsidized by the Communist party...no one on this campus is being subsidized by anyone or anything, except by their own intelligent reasoning.” I suspect, Redford joked, that “I wouldn’t mind the subsidy, frankly—I would take you all out and buy you some packages of gum and bars and the military boys some beer,” he said, turning his attention to the front three rows, which had been appropriated by members of the Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC).⁵⁷

Redford answered his antagonists with a quote from St. Paul: “‘To prove all things and hold fast to that which is good.’ Whatever is good in the ROTC ought to be maintained,” he stressed, “and the bad ought to be

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ *Student Life*, March 21, 1935, 2.

⁵⁷ Peterson, Box 101, folder 9, SCA.

annihilated. Or, so much as the ROTC on the campus creates the militaristic attitude, I am against it."⁵⁸ As for the intent of the cadets prominently seated in the front rows, *Student Life* reported that "had anything been said to cast reflection on the loyalty of the school to the United States [or if] any anarchistic suggestions [were] made concerning the ousting of ROTC these minute men intended to have their say."⁵⁹

Redford concluded his remarks by invoking the Golden Rule. He urged his fellow students to interpret their lives "in terms of social usefulness...[and] to live as nearly as possible to that which Jesus said: 'Do unto others as you would have others do unto you.'"⁶⁰

Student Life described the anti-war rally as a huge success, although the campus remained divided. While student Leo Hawkes felt that the "school [was] fortunate to have a man [such as Redford] with his moral courage," Lieutenant John E. Pitzer of the ROTC program said that he was "glad [to be] leaving little Russia."⁶¹

Sherman Lloyd heralded Redford's "gesture...as a portrayal of the intense interest with which students are grasping at the straws in the advance of war propaganda," and as he had consistently claimed: "The welfare of all nations is superior to the interests of any single national group."⁶²

Veneta Nielsen added "her pound of words to the scale of reason," according to Redford. In her poem *Protest*, which appeared in the following edition of *Student Life*, she penned:

Like children who in early morning
Have rubbed our names upon a frosted window pane
And in the sunlight seen the steam rise
And the cursive writing vanish - then again
At twilight reappear, but meanwhile
Have forgotten all the words - we have innate
In us a proneness to forget the tragic letters
We traced upon the thinly polished bitterness
Of our indecent, godless hate.



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**Veneta L. Nielsen, professor of
English at USAC.**

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ *Student Life*, April 18, 1935, 4.

⁶⁰ Peterson, Box 101, folder 9, SCA. .

⁶¹ *Student Life*, April 18, 1935, 4. Pitzer's reference to USAC being "little Russia" is clearly aimed at his perception that Redford was a communist.

⁶² Ibid.

Yet must we fight? Christ, breathe thy flawless breath
 Against this marred world window and reveal
 How once, so short a time ago, we self-betrayed,
 Outraged the race, and Thee, and, God knows, even
 death.⁶³

A second anti-war rally in 1936 drew an estimated five hundred thousand students, nearly half the entire undergraduate population of the United States.⁶⁴ Students at the USAC did not participate, however, owing largely to the absence of Grant Redford. Salt Lake City newspapers reported that without his leadership “USAC today permitted the time set for the holding of anti-war demonstrations to go by entirely unnoticed.”⁶⁵

Where was Redford during this landmark event? The college had appointed him to the faculty at the BAC in Cedar City, allowing him to complete his degree in absentia in 1937. It is unclear whether Redford’s appointment was an act of administrative subterfuge, designed to diffuse student unrest, or whether the institution simply acknowledged and rewarded a budding scholar.

The war that erupted in Europe in 1939 and in December 1941 engulfed the United States disillusioned many American students who had expended considerable energy opposing it. The 1930s were in part, however, a decade of colossal disenchantment, especially for those idealists who sincerely believed in the force of golden rule principles to rehabilitate human behavior.⁶⁶

In the summer of 1941, on the eve of Japan’s attack on Pearl Harbor, Grant Redford expressed his discontent of war in the *Rocky Mountain Review*. “How can any of us observe the internecine slaughter going on in the world and continue to refer to our time as one of progress,” he asked? “What good...does it do us to save men with marvelous medical skill if our purpose in saving them is to kill them with sickening efficiency?” Human relationships, Redford stressed, should be the measure of progress, not “claims of scientific accomplishments.” We must be “incapable of measuring progress” in these terms, Redford lamented, or else why would we “continue to prate our progress while we tolerate, and even glory in, the unprogressive, and revoltingly stupid practice of wholesale slaughter?”⁶⁷

This group of students who attended USAC in the 1930s left a legacy extending beyond Cache Valley and northern Utah. Veneta Nielsen and Austin Fife both retired from teaching at Utah State University in the

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Cohen, *When the Old Left Was Young*, 94–95.

⁶⁵ Redford, Box 25, SCA..

⁶⁶ As already noted, Ray B. West, Jr.’s, romantic notions of the radical left were undermined when he offered to work as a publicist on behalf of Colorado’s working class, but received merely an invitation to participate in vandalism. See, West, Box 64, folder 10, p. 330, SCA..

⁶⁷ “Progress vs. Slaughter,” *Rocky Mountain Review*, 5 (Spring–Summer, 1941): 2.

1970s. Nielsen passed away peacefully in 1998.⁶⁸ Austin, together with his wife Alta, devoted much of their life to the study of Mormon culture. Austin Fife succumbed to Parkinson's disease in 1986.⁶⁹ The Fife Folklore Program and associated rooms in the Merrill-Cazier Library at Utah State University are named in their honor.

May Swenson became one of the most celebrated poets of her time, winning the Bollingen Prize for poetry in 1984, and receiving the coveted MacArthur Fellowship just two years before her death at Ocean View, Delaware, in 1989.⁷⁰ She is buried in Logan.



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Ray B. West, Jr., in 1933.

Ray B. West, Jr., after retiring from San Francisco State University, returned to his native Utah, where he continued to write and research. He died at Santaquin in 1990.⁷¹

This small circle of students, and the campus generally, grieved together in February 1935 over the death of one of their own, Bill Hess. Hess, a talented student actor and stage director, took his own life in a desolate area of Wyoming, east of Evanston. While the campus mourned, Grant Redford penned an open letter to honor his friend in *Student Life*. "Dear Bill," Redford began, "You will notice that I have neither dated nor addressed this letter. The end of the journey you have taken has no address, nor...time. But little things like that are really such small matters, aren't they? And little things never bothered you much did they? It was always the big things." Redford went on to tell Hess how much they all missed his expertise, and how the play *You Never Can Tell* suffered from his absence. Everyone was saying: "That damn Bill oughta been here to show us how to do this stuff. You knew lots of the answers when you were here. You know all the answers now. 'Hell,'" Redford stated wistfully, "it must be great to know all the answers."⁷² Thirty years later Redford, too, would take his own life.

Marion Nielsen (who along with his sister Virginia attended USAC and were both members of the Scribbler's Club in the 1930s) once wrote to Redford about the difficulty of walking "the liberal tightrope without

⁶⁸ *Herald Journal*, October 27, 1998.

⁶⁹ Register to the Papers of Austin E. and Alta S. Fife, p.1, Special Collections and Archives, Merrill-Cazier Library, Utah State University.

⁷⁰ Register to May Swenson Papers, p. 1, Special Collections and Archives, Merrill-Cazier Library, Utah State University.

⁷¹ Register to Ray B. West, Jr., Papers, p.1, Special Collections and Archives, Merrill-Cazier Library, Utah State University.

⁷² *Student Life*, February 14, 1935.

falling into the tyranny of the Right or the tyranny of the Left.”⁷³ Finding an acceptable equilibrium became a perilous balancing act for these students.

Achieving a political balance proved difficult nationally, as well. While American society demonstrated great resiliency during the Depression of the 1930s, the calamity also exposed an inequality, and accentuated the disparity between those who had and those who had not. The amalgam of ideas, which emerged to counteract this disparity, moved eventually onto the nation’s campuses, where students launched the first mass student movement in 1932.

In their disdain for war, support of the poor and working class and espousal of a “golden rule” philosophy, student radicals in the 1930s marched decidedly leftward in hopes of mitigating the disastrous effects of the Depression, and to quell the propaganda they felt was propelling the nation towards war. Student activism, however, was not limited to the metropolitan areas of the east and west coasts, but also involved a handful of gifted students at the Utah State Agricultural College, who responded to the economic and social instability of the 1930s in much the same manner as did their national counterparts.

⁷³ Letter, Marion Nielsen to Grant Redford, March 7, 1950, Box 17, folder 1, Redford, SCA.